DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 543 CS 501 060

AUTHOR Friedman, Paul G.
TITLE Introspection: An Approach to Individualizing Communication Instruction.
PUB DATE Dec 74
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (Chicago, December, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Higher Education; Human Relations; *Individual Development; *Individualized Instruction; Interpersonal Relationship; Role Perception; Social Attitudes; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Introspection

ABSTRACT

Students approach courses in communication with a lifetime of experience in the processes to be studied. Their already deeply imbedded attitudes and habits must be considered in planning instruction. Accompanying each course unit might be a series of introspective questions that encourage students to become aware of their relevant preconceptions, the unique opportunities in their current lives to employ course material, and their individual goals for personal growth. Counseling and psychotherapy literature suggest approaches for self-exploration. This paper adapts several of these for use in communication instruction. (Author)

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Introspection: An Approach to Individualizing Communication Instruction

Paul G. Friedman
Assistant Professor
Speech Communication and
Human Relations
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas 66044

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Abstract

Students approach courses in communication with a life-time of experience in the processes to be studied. Their already deeply imbedded attitudes and habits must be considered in planning instruction. Accompanying each course unit might be a series of introspective questions that encourage students to become aware of their relevant preconceptions, the unique opportunities in their current lives to employ course material, and their individual goals for personal growth. Counseling and psychotherapy literature suggest approaches for self-exploration. This paper adapts several of these for use in communication instruction.

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I

Inherent in the encounter between students and the discipline of communication are several characteristics which imply how it should (and should not) be taught. A student enters a class in interpersonal communication carrying with him deeply embedded attitudes and habits developed during a lifetime of participation in the process to be studied. In fact, each student has a unique life history. No two people grow up under identical conditions. Every individual has contacted his own network of significant people who have shaped his thinking and behavior when relating to others.

In addition, at the moment he is taking that class, each student has his own specific relationships to which he would like to apply what he is learning. To be maximally meaningful, his new awarenesses must be transferable to his current position vis-a-vis his family, friends, and others with whom he relates. Similarly, the specific personal and professional future each student foresees can have distinct implications for his communication needs.

In sum, all students have different pasts, presents, and anticipated futures which influence markedly how they will perceive and react to their experiences in studying interpersonal communication. These predispositions place this field of study in sharp contrast to virtually all others in the educational spectrum. Usually, instructors of a foreign language, science, history, mathematics, or literature can assume that students have

never been exposed to the ideas they will be presenting, that they all need to learn a common corpus of material- and that they will apply their learnings in a predictable social context.

Teaching in interpersonal communication that attempts to grossly redirect a student's daily used, life-long patterns, that ignores his past and current phenomenal world, that seeks change where he experiences no need for it is doomed to failure. Only an intensely individualized approach is appropriately suited to this discipline.

This need may account for the current movement towards using classroom group experiences incorporating individual feedback. Nevertheless, these exercises still leave the student subject to the norms of his classroom peer group or the observation form used. Informal papers encouraging students to react personally to course ideas are a step closer to individuation of learning, although they usually are designed unsystematically and bring scattered, superficial responses. My intent is to propose a more comprehensive approach to bringing students' reservoir of preconceptions to bear on their learning. It suggests procedures for including self-awareness or introspective experiences into communication instruction.

II

The literature dealing with interpersonal relations that now accounts for individual differences most thoroughly is in the realm of counseling and psychotherapy. The professional in these fields is expected to consider each client individually and to help him to explore his current life situation, the path that brought him to it, and how he can grow to be more satisfied with his personal relationships. These are closely related to the goals of instruction in interpersonal communication. Many theoretical frameworks, each stressing a different perspective on this process, exist to guide counselor-client dialogue. Almost all have some, as yet indefinite, degree of effectiveness. Most counselors now employ a variety of approaches, selecting the one (or more) which seems most suitable in each case.

It recently has been found that when counselees or students are armed with these techniques themselves, self-directed growth can occur. This process has been particularly effective with applications of human relations training. When given the interventions usually employed in such workshops, in packaged form, the patients and students have gained as much as others in professionally-led groups.[1,2] Much the same can be done to individualize instruction in interpersonal communication.

The way I have employed this approach is to accompany each lecture-discussion unit in my course (entitled "Introduction to Human Relations") with a handout that poses a series of questions designed to encourage

student introspection. Students respond only to those questions which they feel comfortable and motivated to answer, thus maximizing personal relevance and minimizing the danger of intruding into vulnerable areas.

One might be concerned that such questions, drawn from the repertoire of highly-trained professionals, might prove too potent or explosive for students to handle on their own. This concern merits consideration and ultimately, since this issue cannot be fully resolved through objective measures, each instructor should use only those he feels confident about. Keep in mind that the greatest danger to psychological health comes from pressures unwillingly and inappropriately inflicted on a vulnerable individual. When group pressure and leader influence are not present, when students can choose to deal only with the questions that seem to be of value to them, which they feel comfortable, and motivated to answer, their safety is most effectively assured. Compare such freedom with front-of-the-room exposure demanded of anxious or reticent students in a public speaking class, and the relative danger in this process is extremely low, while the rewards are potentially great.

A paradigm for such a series of questions, each based on a theory of counseling or psychotherapy, is in section IV. At the beginning of the semester, before considering any of the unit-specific questions, students are asked to take some overall perspectives to enhance the effectiveness of their subsequent introspective explorations. These are summarized below.

III

The students introspection is pointed in three general directions: toward the past, at the present, and into the future. Each orientation is broadly established by an initial experience which provides a foundation for subsequent more specific, examination.

The student gains a perspective on his past by drawing a "life-line." He begins simply by drawing a line across a blank page and labeling one end "birth" and the other "now". He then is asked to divide the line into segments, cutting the line each time a major period ended or he became involved in a new context. For example, each new residence, school, job, or major friendship, each birth, death, or marital change which affected him would be entered. Finally, he lists the contexts, the people most significant to him in each setting, the major tasks each involved, and the degree of success or happiness felt in each. This overview of his life provides a reference which he can consult when contemplating past influences on his current behavior.

Present opportunities and issues are reviewed by drawing a "role-network." This consists of a large circle surrounded by several smaller ones, like a sun circled by planets. The large circle is himself; the smaller ones are the people with whom he relates most often or who are most important to him at this time in his life. He identifies the role he fills towards each of them, and vice-versa (e.g. father-son, husband-wife), the major transactions each relationship involves (e.g. socializing, decision-making, personal sharing), the ways in which each relationship currently is satisfying and how each might be improved. This summary of

his current communication field provides the student with a reference for contemplating how the course material can be applied in his life at present.

The future he anticipates is summarized in a "weekly context" chart. This has the headings of a weekly appointment page, the days of the week listed across the top and the periods of the day listed down the left-hand side. He imagines how his time slots will be filled, and, down the center, he lists the contexts and the people with whom he expects to be interacting during a typical week one month, one year, and five-years into the future. (e.g. teaching a class of high school students, making decisions with my wife). These future opportunities for communication, along with the dissatisfactions he identified in his current relationships, provide an individualized set of goals or target situations for applying in the future the instruction he is to receive in interpersonal communication.

These personalized overviews of the students' past, present, and future in communication are further detailed and employed by them regularly throughout the semester as they consider all the units in the curriculum and, through introspection, relate them to their own lives.

IV

The entries in this section provide basic models for devising introspective questions to supplement each unit of study in a course in interpersonal communication. The term "process x" is used where the specific topic or unit title would be inserted. Some of the topics to which I have applied these questions in my own teaching are: initiating relationships, group decision-making, conflict resolution, self-disclosure,

the helping relationship, informing others, persuading others, group creativity, support and confrontation, leadership and conformity, etc.

The questions here are articulated as succinctly as possible. They are intended to serve as skeletal forms which should then be elaborated or fleshed out in order to best suit the topic and the student group for which they are being used.

Each question is introduced with a brief rationale, offered merely as a reminder for those already familiar with that approach, and a reference for further investigation of the theoretical premises, for those not familiar with them.

A. Influences of the Past

1. Albert Bandura[3] found that children are highly influenced by the adult models to which they have been exposed, particularly their parents. People often unconsciously adopt parental communication styles and carry them on into their own adult lives. Consequently, it might prove insightful to ask:

How did your parents or others in your family generally handle process X? Can you identify any similarities between their behavior and your own?

2. Freudian therapy[4] is based on the process of "transference" wherein the therapist is treated as a parent figure or someone else with whom the patient has an unresolved relationship. An individual's reactions to others often is influenced by their resemblance to people encountered earlier in his life. It can be insightful, therefore, to ask:

Examine your "role network" and identify the people with whom

you have difficulty when dealing with process X. Do any of them remind you of someone with whom you shared a similar experience earlier in your life? If so, how are the relationships similar, and how are they different?

3. Phillips[5] found that college students who were particularly shy or reticent could recall with much more vivid detail embarrassing or ineffectual speaking situations from their early childhood than could more outgoing students. His finding suggests that a striking or traumatic negative experience can influence one's attitude toward similar experiences years later. It might, therefore, be insightful to ask:

Can you recall an experience involving process X that was keenly embarrassing or frustrating. What about it made it so? As you think about engaging in process X to what extent do you believe memories of that past experience affect your current attitude toward it?

4. One of the practices in "psychosynthesis" developed by Roberto Assagioli[6] is the training of will power. A technique that he employs is encouraging vivid, detailed recall of past experiences in which one willfully and successfully completed acts comparable to ones now appearing desirable. To put this practice to use, one might ask the student to:

Identify an experience you have had using process X that was particularly satisfying or rewarding to you. Recall what you did to bring it about, being as specific or detailed as possible in delineating the steps you took. List them in chronological order, if you can, and feel no qualms about boasting or affirming proudly your contribution to making that experience a successful one. For example, you might begin each statement with "I. . ." and then continue by spelling out one dimension

of your positive behavior.

5. There is greater interest now than ever before in teaching communication skills at earlier levels of schooling.[7] Many students may already have had some formal training in the process to be taught. It might be wise to have them recall this by asking:

Have you ever learned about process X in school, read about it in a book, or in any other way had some formal instruction in how to deal with situations like these? If so, what did you learn that sticks in your mind today?

6. Eric Berne[8] highlighted the lingering role of Parental admonitions in determining present-day behavior. He suggested that at times one's interaction is guided by "old tapes" or his parents' homilies about "good" behavior or what "should" be done. This postulate suggests the question:

How would your parents have advised you to behave when doing X? Would their advice be different for dealing with the specific people in your role network? To what extent do you strive to live up to this advice?

7. Carl Jung[9] subdivided individual responses into the "persona" (the superficial social mask of the individual which he presents to others in his social relationships) and the "ego" (a deeper part of the psyche which is reflective of personal experiences and is partly conscious and partly unconscious). When these two differ a person often experiences disharmony and frustration. Similarly, Andrew Salter[10] believes that people experience difficulty when they inhibit their emotions and

greater effectiveness when they express them. One's inhibitions are learned, so he encourages relearning of expressiveness. He rewards feeling talk, physical expression of feelings, and spontaneous action. His "conditioned reflex therapy" is simply reinforcement of spontaneous, emotional responses. This orientation suggests the following line of questioning:

In our desire to get along with others, at times we don't fully reveal or act in accord with what we really think or feel. Can you recall instances, when engaging in process X, that your "social" self or "mask" differed markedly from your inner or "real" self? If so, identify the people or conditions at those times which influenced your inhibition. Imagine what might have happened and how you would have felt if you had been more fully open and honest. Consider whether those same influences exist currently. What implications if any, does this exploration have for your future growth goals?

B. Exploring the Present

1. Carl Rogers[11] stresses the value of the counselor's genuine, empathic, supportive interaction with the client for enhancing his self-awareness and feelings of self-worth. Since we are dealing with an individual's solitary introspection, a technique developed by George Kelly[12] called the "self-characterization" allows for an imagined helping relationship of the type advocated by Rogers. His approach, adapted a bit for the purpose of communication instruction, calls for the student to:

Write a description of yourself describing what you think, feel, and do during the process of X, just as if you were the principal character

in a play. Write it as it might be written by a friend who knows you very well, who cares about you, who likes and respects you, and who is honest and open about what he says. Be sure to write it in the third person. For example, start out by saying, "He (or she) is. . ." then review this sketch and underline the statements which are of greatest significance for guiding your future personal growth in this process.

2. The methodologies of meditation[13] and psychoanalysis[14] encourage unrestricted awareness of whatever comes to mind. Both suggest that one monitor or register his ongoing thoughts for a period of time without judgment. The former advocates that this process be done internally in order to enhance inner peace. The latter employs verbalizing, called "free association," to enhance self-awareness. This process can be done by simply asking the student to: "Begin with the phrase "process X," and then think aloud on paper, writing whatever comes to mind, trying not to censor anything except to return to this theme when you wander from it. Do this for ten minutes without lifting your pencil from the paper. Then look back over what you have written and underline what seems most significant to you.

3. E. G. Williamson states that the counselor helps "the individual appraise himself in comparison with external requirements, whether they be school, vocational, or societal. Thus we help him to measure himself against the requirements of the external society."[15] Thus, the question implied is:

Review your "current context" chart. In which situations do opportunities arise to use X? Briefly assess your ability to employ X

to your own satisfaction in each context. What differences exist between the contexts in which you feel confident and those in which you are less effective?

4. Albert Ellis[16] believes that the counselor must identify the beliefs or generalizations which guide a client's evaluation of his experiences. He believes that many people, after engaging in an interpersonal encounter, evaluate the interaction by irrational, impossible standards that balloon feelings of self-denegration. He encourages his clients to judge themselves more kindly, more realistically.

By what criterion or standard do you judge whether or not you have done process X to your satisfaction? In other words, what would have to happen for an incident in which this process was involved to be successful? What would make you feel it was a failure? We often set unrealistically high standards for ourselves, making frustration likely. Review your evaluation criteria for this possibility, perhaps by considering whether you would want a best friend to live up to them. If they seem too demanding, revise them until they seem within the realm of possibility.

5. Thomas and Biddle[17] stress the influence of one's role vis-a-vis others on how they interact. Each social role comes laden with expectations or norms that make many behaviors within that role relatively predictable. A student's awareness of his behavior in regard to a particular communication process might be clarified if he examined what his and the other's roles are:

Look over your role network and consider how (if at all) the way you deal with process X differs with each person. Then consider how

the roles (e.g. friend, sibling, student) you and the other people are in when you interact affect that interaction.

6. Recently, much attention has been given to the way our society's racial[18] and sex-role[19] stereotypes shape individual's behavior. To explore the possible influence of these forces on your students, it might prove fruitful to ask:

To what extent do you believe that your race or ethnic status (being white, Jewish, Italian, black, Indian, Puerto Rican, etc.) has influenced how you behave in situations involving process X?

By examining your role network, do you recall any differences in your interaction when you are involved with someone else of your own racial or ethnic group from what your experience is like with a member of another group?

To what extent do you believe your sex (being male or female) has influenced how you behave when involved in process X with members of the opposite sex?

7. Joseph Schorr[20] encourages his clients' use of imagination for insights into their phenomenological worlds. He uses a technique, called "the most-or-least method," to help them to sharpen their awareness of their attitudes and values. Some examples of how it might be adapted are:

What is the worst thing that could happen to you in process X?

What is the best thing someone could say about your employment of process X?

8. The "sentence completion" method is a widely used and highly

regarded projective technique.[21] It requires response to a line of inquiry that can quickly identify an individual's preconceptions and goals in that area. Some potential applications of this device are:

If I were asked how to engage in process X effectively, I'd answer. . .

A question I would like to ask an expert in process X is. . .

9. Harry Garner[22] has developed what he calls "confrontation problem-solving therapy," in which he stridently challenges the existing mental set of a client who is experiencing difficulty with a statement that usually reminds him of his potential for more effective functioning. Then he always asks: "What do you think or feel about what I told you?" This encourages reflection in a new, less negative, often productive direction. Students might do the same if asked:

Suppose someone who is wise and caring and who knows you well were to tell you, "You can do process X, stop believing that you can't." What would you think or feel about what he told you?

C. Affecting the Future

1. Victor Frankl emphasizes the significance of long-range hope or meaning in enhancing the determination and effectiveness with which one deals with current struggles in his life. He stresses that clients clarify what they most want to accomplish, i.e. that they identify the tasks that would give meaning and value to their lives. He states that these "values do not drive a man; they do not push him, but rather pull him."[23] It might be helpful, therefore, for students to clarify how a process in communication fits into their personal goals by considering:

If, after you die, someone were to write an obituary describing who you were and what you did in the time of your life, and it were to describe you as you would like to be, what are some accomplishments that you would want to see included? How, if at all, might increased skill or use of process X help you to realize these accomplishments?

2. Counselors who employ behavior modification[24] suggest that long-range, vaguely expressed goals can be less effective in achieving change than short-term objectives that can be objectively evaluated. These provide quick and frequent checkpoints and opportunities for reinforcement. Consequently, the student might be asked:

Examine your weekly context chart(s) for the near future and decide upon a time and place when you might employ process X in a new or more effective way. Describe in as much detail as you can what you will do, with whom, when, and where. Try also to state what would have to happen for you to consider this action to have been successful.

3. Raths, Harmin, and Simon[25] believe that people operate most effectively when they are clear about the values underlying their behavior. One way that they assist value clarification is to ask students to consider the alternatives to their decisions. When individuals have made a choice after freely contemplating all their options, they believe the decision is more likely to be a satisfying one.

Another step in evaluating your goal(s) is to consider what other choices you could have made. People often make decisions without adequately assessing and choosing among their available options. Try to list some other possible goals that you could have chosen, and rank their

desireability to you along with the one you have already made. Is your first choice still the preferred one?

4. Karen Horney[26] stressed the danger of attempting to live up to too idealized a self-image. She encouraged her clients to realistically face and accept their actual selves before attempting to achieve personal growth. It might prove helpful for students to:

Consider whether the goal(s) you have set for yourself are realistically attainable. It can be frustrating to pursue idealistic, but inappropriate, goals. Rate this goal on a scale of one to ten in terms of the likelihood that you will achieve it (one being very unlikely, ten being very likely). If your rating is below seven, perhaps you should rephrase it in a more modest way.

5. Frederick Perls[27] stressed that human behavior often follows an internal dialogue between two poles of the self, which he called the top dog and the underdog. The former advocates an ideal behavior, the latter brings up excuses or reasons for avoiding it. He encouraged his clients to externalize this dialogue, hopefully thereby integrating both parts of themselves and feeling more centered, less conflicted about their experiences.

This process might be encouraged through the suggestion:

If you experience a desire to achieve your goal <u>and</u> some hesitation or resistance to pursuing it, imagine that each impulse has a voice of its own and write a dialogue in which these two parts or voices within you speak to each other, hopefully until some resolution is reached.

6. In the reality therapy of William Glasser[28] clients are

expected to identify what they want, to agree to do what is necessary in order to attain their goals, and to responsibly carry out the necessary steps until the job is completed satisfactorily. By this encouraging them to take responsibility for themselves and to do so successfully, he is helping them to feel more capable and to bring more of their lives under their own control, thus empowering them to live more effectively. This process can be put into practice by asking students to:

Identify the time or date by which you would like to achieve your goal. Also, describe what you will need to do in order to bring it about. Write this up as a "contract" with yourself, e.g. By date X, I will. . . "Then try to live up to that commitment. (If you do not, it means that you still had unrealistic expectations and may need to write another contract that is more appropriate.)

7. Aylion and Azrin[29] change behavior by using a token economy. This is based on the notion that people do whatever gets them what they want (rewards). A student can set up a personal reward system through introspection.

If you were to carry out this step, what reward(s) would it bring? In what way might you plan a reward for yourself that would encourage you even more to carry it out?

8. J. L. Moreno[30] developed "psychodrama" in which individuals role-play the relationships in which they experience conflict. One technique used is "role reversal", in which the client plays the role of the other person in the relationship. This assists him in seeing the situation from the other's point of view, as well as in being more aware of the thoughts

he believes the other has. This process can be approximated by asking the student to:

Write the dialogue of the situation you would like to change as you suspect it will occur, i.e. use your imagination to predict what will happen and write it out. This script can provide clues as to where you believe problems might arise and, perhaps, ideas about how they might be overcome.

9. Everett Shostrum[31] believes that the feelings which underly our behavior must be brought to the surface and be openly acknowledged. A student might grow in awareness of the unspoken feeling-level beneath much interaction if he is asked to:

Review the dialogue you wrote above and try to guess the feeling each person might be experiencing as he speaks (e.g. fear, anger, hurt, joy) Write these in the margin next to the comments. Then consider how the situation might work out if these feelings were openly acknowledged.

V

The students' responses to these questions can be useful in a variety of ways. To the student himself, they serve to heighten his consciousness about the process being studied; they help to explain the sources of his everyday behavior and the role each process plays in his daily life; they suggest how the process is relevant to his future and how he himself can take responsibility for putting into action what he learns in class. The responses also would be of interest to his peers. Students usually are eager to compare their own answers with those of others in group discussion.

Finally, they can provide the teacher with insights into how the course material relates to the phenomenal world of his students. Although the students should have the right to keep their responses private, some voluntary sharing with the teacher can suggest many specific examples and adaptations useful in making lecture material more immediately applicable to that particular student population.

These questions were intended only to provide raw material for further processing through the sensitivities and professional judgment of the communication instructor. Hopefully, they suggest ways to lay the foundation from which students can adapt a uniform text, lecture, or exercise to the contours of their own unique existence. The instructor is an individual, too, with his own personal history and already developed screening mechanisms which will be involved in selecting the questions that seem most appropriate and valuable with his curriculum. My experience makes me confident that they serve to increase markedly students' personal involvement and the rewards they reap from coursework in communication.

FOOTNOTES

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